# 17.2 Radioactive decay (full E.3, SL)

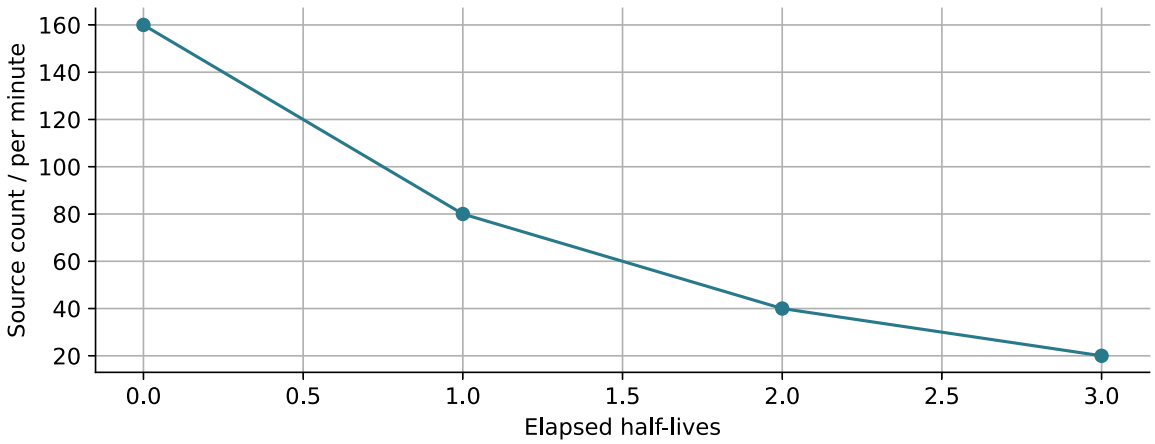
Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____ **Total: 19 marks**

**KEY WORDS** isotope • binding energy • half-life • background radiation

## Objective

Practise the full guide E.3 toolkit at standard level: isotopes, mass defect and binding energy with $E = \Delta mc^2$, the binding-energy-per-nucleon curve, the strong nuclear force, the random spontaneous nature of decay, alpha, beta-minus, beta-plus and gamma decay equations with neutrinos, penetration and ionizing ability, activity, count rate, background radiation and integer half-lives. Original practice; not an official IB paper.

## 1 Key knowledge and worked examples




■ **The E.3 rule set (SL)**

$$E = \Delta mc^2 \qquad N = \frac{N_0}{2^n} \quad (n \text{ half-lives})$$

Alpha: $A-4$, $Z-2$. Beta-minus: $Z+1$ with an electron and antineutrino. Beta-plus: $Z-1$ with a positron and neutrino. Gamma: $A$, $Z$ unchanged. Penetration falls and ionizing power rises in the order gamma, beta, alpha; subtract background from any count rate.

**■ Worked example: counting through background**

A sample gives 5200 counts/min with a 200 counts/min background: the source alone is 5000. After three half-lives it contributes $5000/8 = 625$, and the meter reads 825. Two habits: strip the background before halving anything, and check decay equations conserve both $A$ and $Z$.

## 2 Practice

**2.1** Define an isotope, and state what isotopes of an element share. [2]

**2.2** State what is meant by the mass defect of a nucleus. [1]

**2.3** Write the full nuclear equation for beta-minus decay of ${}^{14}_{6}C$. [2]

**2.4** Place alpha, beta and gamma radiation in order of increasing penetrating ability. [1]

## 3 Exam-style questions

**3.1** State the nuclear changes in $A$ and $Z$ for alpha decay, and write the equation for ${}^{226}_{88}Ra$ decaying by alpha emission. [3]

**3.2** Two protons and two neutrons have total mass 4.0319 $u$; a helium-4 nucleus has mass 4.0026 $u$. Calculate the binding energy in MeV (1 $u$ = 931.5 MeV/c$^2$) and the binding energy per nucleon. [4]

**3.3** Explain why a medical tracer isotope is chosen with a short half-life and gamma emission, referring to penetration and ionizing ability. [3]

**3.4** A source reads 4200 counts/min above a background of 200 counts/min. Calculate the count rate after two half-lives, and state one assumption. [3]

## Solutions

Original-task marking: M1 method, A1 accuracy, B1 reasoning.

**2.1** Nuclides of the same element with different neutron numbers; they share the same proton number $Z$ (and chemical symbol).

**2.2** The difference between the total mass of the separate nucleons and the mass of the assembled nucleus – the mass converted to binding energy.

**2.3** ${}^{14}_{6}C \rightarrow {}^{14}_{7}N + {}^{0}_{-1}e + \bar{\nu}$.

**2.4** Alpha, beta, gamma.

**3.1** $A$ falls by 4 and $Z$ falls by 2; ${}^{226}_{88}Ra \rightarrow {}^{222}_{86}Rn + {}^{4}_{2}\alpha$.

**3.2** $\Delta m = 4.0319 - 4.0026 = 0.0293\ u$; $E = 0.0293 \times 931.5 = 27.3$ MeV; per nucleon: $27.3/4 = 6.8$ MeV.

**3.3** Gamma penetrates body tissue to reach detectors outside while ionizing least along its path, minimizing damage; a short half-life means activity – and dose – fall quickly once the scan is done.

**3.4** Source alone: $4200 - 200 = 4000$ counts/min; after two half-lives: $4000/4 = 1000$; the meter reads $1000 + 200 = 1200$ counts/min, assuming the background rate stays constant.